Enhancing English Teaching: Caldecott Award Books

By Patience Lea McGuire

In 1938, an award was established in honor of the illustrator, Randolph Caldecott. Since then, gold, silver, and bronze Caldecott awards have been given annually to books which have illustrations as the heart of their stories.

These award-winning books are part of a core collection which librarians choose when building school libraries. But many teachers and curriculum developers are not familiar with Caldecott books, and have yet to realize the potential of these books for enhancing the teaching of English as a Foreign Language. (See Footnote 1 below)

What are the special advantages and uses of the prize-winning picture books for teaching English? First of all, these books are adaptable to all skill levels and age groups. They use vocabulary creatively, have well-written story-lines, and offer a taste of authentic literature based on universal themes-life cycles, interpersonal conflict, obstacles, growth, etc. The accompanying illustrations serve as visual aids to comprehension. And compared to other visually rich media-interactive TV, CD ROM disks, computer programs-the cost of these books is relatively low. (See Footnote 2 below)

Teachers will find these books give a focus for developing language study units. The number and variety of activities are limited only by the imagination of the staff and the amount of time they have.

A Ten-step Sequence

1. Read the book to the students. The trick is knowing the story well enough to be able to hold the pictures toward the students while reading with exaggerated expression.

2. Let Students read the story aloud. In small groups, students can be instructed to hold the book as the teacher did (so that all can see the illustrations) and to read expressively. The benefit of a good story is that people usually enjoy hearing it repeated. While the students are reading, the teacher can jot down mispronunciations

on a sheet of paper, the chalkboard, or better yet, on a transparency to be displayed later for pronunciation practice.

3. Monitor discussions of the story. After students are familiar with the story, and the class is divided into discussion groups, the most desirable scenario is for group-initiated and spontaneous discussion. A teacher should know if more structure is needed, i.e., if the large group needs to brainstorm possible topics for subsequent discussion or if sets of questions need to be provided to keep discussion on track. Once small group discussions start, the teacher monitors, gaining valuable information for planning subsequent questions and activities.

4. Provide time for reflection and assimilation. After small group discussions, students are invited to write a paragraph on any related topic, incorporating what they have learned from others, and clarifying their own points of view. Errors in comprehension or in written expression can be used as the basis for further learning activities.

5. Ask for a one-sentence oral summary of the paragraph written in step 4. Collapsing a body of thought into one complete and correct oral sentence involves a complexity of skills. Those summary statements which are succinct and correct can be displayed on the board or overhead projector as good examples. Analysis of good work rewards the student who produced it and benefits the rest of the class, as well.

6. Interpret an illustration outside the context of the story In Caldecott books, the illustrations are notable and can be used in their own right. One extension activity is to use a given illustration or one that a student chooses and ask the student to interpret the picture for the whole class.

7. Invite students to say what they learned about the interpreter (in step #6). After some of the students have given their interpretation of pictures, invite other students to say what they learned about the interpreter from the analysis s/he made. For example, students may say, "I learned that X has a good imagination and is interested in making contrasts," or "It seems that Y associates the details in the picture with his/her childhood. Then X and Y are asked to respond. This activity involves a deep level of student interaction and playfulness.

8. Create new stories. Different levels of thinking are involved when students are asked to create new stories using the illustrations as a base. This activity can be oral or written. In this way, their stories become resources which can be edited and "published"-on bulletin boards, in hallways, in a class or school anthology, on computer disks and printouts, or as "big books," etc.

9. Share the new stories. Story-sharing sessions are a natural follow-up to the creation of new stories. One way to exploit this kind of sharing is to have students repeat the stories told them by others. Students enjoy hearing stories, and become especially alert if someone retells theirs. They enjoy the chance to verify the repeated version- was their intention conveyed? Were their nuances understood?

10. Use student paragraphs (See #4, above) as the basis of meeting further learning needs. One way to make students conscious of their own improvement is to reproduce a sentence, complete with errors, and work with the group to improve the piece. A next step is to have students create correct sentences using similar patterns.

In all the above steps, the emphasis is on the student-student enjoyment of a story, student participation in reading the story, summarizing, discussing, and writing. All these activities can flow from the use of one good book. Multiple copies are not necessary. In fact, for the type of literature-based language learning described above, money is better spent getting six excellent titles than six copies of one. (See Footnote 3 below)

Using Illustrated Books with Adults

During the summer of 1993, Caldecott award books were piloted in adult conversation classes in El Salvador. The first step was to justify the appropriateness of this literature for adult English learners.

This is the justification we used: In elementary monolingual (English) schools, students receive six to eight hours of instruction in the medium of English each day making a total of 700 to 1400 hours of English each school year. Third graders who began in kindergarten have accumulated between 2000 and 3000 hours of academic English. This is far more than an adult receives in EFL courses.

This explanation shows adult students in EFL that books written on an elementary level are relevant for them too, especially when it comes to structure, grammar, and style. Furthermore, adults, having greater recognition of cognates, wider experience with literacy, and greater background knowledge, can draw upon these strengths in discussing children's stories.

From the first reading of the first book, these adults saw how much there was to gain: new vocabulary and different uses of familiar vocabulary, and application of the patterns they studied in a communicative context. With a well-written book, beautifully and imaginatively illustrated, there is also a "wonder factor".. . an adventure reminiscent of childhood discovery, when all things are new and full of surprise. Charming tales and imaginative pictures summon up childhood feelings of adventure and discovery and facilitate the language learning process.

Let me describe some of my experiences in the El Salvador project using the following Caldecott books: *The Ox-Cart Man, The Little Island, Madeline's Rescue, and Fables.*

The Ox-Cart Man

This story, written by Donald Hall and illustrated by Barbara Cooney, is easily adapted to adult classes. The following vocabulary was new and interesting and could be introduced in a cause/effect context. For example: shear/wool; spinning wheel/yarn; flax/linen; blossom/apples; sap/maple sugar. . . . The narrative style of the book employs repetition, and concepts that are introduced early in the book are later shown visually. The illustrations and the narrative work together to show the meaning of various prepositions-as when the journey of the ox-cart man takes him over, by, around, past, and through hills, streams, villages and valleys.

Every page contains pictures which amply illustrate the story-lines. There is no need to find supplementary visual aids-they are built right into the book.

As for the story-line, the book deals with a way of life in which hard work is seen as satisfying and rewarding to a family that works together. The New England setting allows a look at four distinct seasons, and since much of the world experiences only a rainy and a dry season, the pictures can stimulate curiosity and conjecture about what ramifications the changing seasons have upon clothing and customs.

The description of Portsmouth market leads into discussions of buying and selling, life in port cities, and the relationships between persons and their possessions. These discussions branch out to include rural and urban culture, population density, and contemporary social, economic, and political considerations.

When reading the book with children, the focus of discussion tends toward the daughter and her embroidery and the son and his knife. With adults, the emphasis is on the father and his marketing skills and the mother in her care-giving capacity.

Although the family members are stereotyped, the stereotype is accurate for the period it portrays-early New England rural life.

The Little Island

The philosophical question, "Are we islands or parts of the whole?" arises every time Golden MacDonald (Margaret Wise Brown's) *The Little Island* is used with adults. The book is bursting with color words and illustrations: white and blue flowers, violets with golden eyes, white-pink blossoms, red strawberries, silver water, green pears, and black crows. The verbs are clever-the kitten*prowls* , seals *bark* , fish *leap* , seaweed *squeaks* , and wind *howls* and *moans.*

Besides illustrating the text, the accompanying pictures are effective for individual students or small groups to develop original stories. A related technique is for groups to develop chain stories in which each member adds to the plot as the pages are turned and pictures are shown.

The question of believing without seeing is addressed when a visiting kitten challenges the connectedness of the island to the rest of the world. There is an opportunity for dramatic reading when the cat tells a fish that it will eat the fish up if it doesn't tell how the island is a part of the land, and when the kitten decides to believe what he cannot see. This juxtaposing of faith and questions of connectedness lends itself to philosophic discussions once adults hear the story and are asked to explore its meaning. If the discussion stays on the superficial level of recounting events and giving descriptions, invite the students to look more deeply-to remember, and to organize one's own memories following the sequence of the book. *The Little Island* lends itself to multiple interpretation: seasonal changes on the island may be likened to the seasons of our lives, and the visitors to the island are comparable to the thoughts that visit our minds.

The Madeline Series

Ludwig Bemelmans has written and illustrated a series of stories about *Madeline*, one of twelve little girls who live in Paris. The first *Madeline* book and *Madeline's Rescue* are Caldecott Award books. Others in the series include *Madeline and the Bad Hat, Madeline in London, Madeline and the Gypsies.* These books, written in simple couplets, follow the adventures of the main character, an appealing, mischievous little girl; supporting characters include an attentive caregiver, Miss Clavel, and eleven other little girls in a French boarding school.

The rhymed story-lines are brief-sometimes only one or two words per page, and detailed illustrations predominate. For example, in Madeline's Rescue, when the little girls are searching for their lost dog, a park scene shows at least eighteen different kinds of dogs, some running, others scratching, standing guard, sniffing, etc. The vocabulary is as carefully chosen as the details in the pictures. The books are fun to read because of their rhythm and rhyme: and on second reading, students generally chime in because they can remember which rhyming word will be used in the context. Madeline's adventures lend themselves to many forms of expansion- discussion of childhood escapades and other stories about children in books, movies, magazines, and television programs. A challenge to creativity is to invite students to place Madeline and her companions-or characters they invent themselves-into a story that uses their own country as a setting. Salvadoran characters ended up riding crowded microbuses, attending soccer games, visiting local museums, and celebrating the New Year.

Fables by Lobel

Lobel's *Fables* is an excellent choice when only one book can be purchased. The book contains twenty original fables, complete with full-page illustration and moral. Each fable is a class in itself. Pre-reading activities should include vocabulary study or predicting what the story is about or what the moral might be. The stories are ideal for dramatic reading or roleplay since the characters are closely defined and quotations are used to carry the stories forward. Follow-up activities may involve group retelling of the stories; making up new stories to go with the pictures; expanding the details of the story; or going past its ending to the next logical-or illogical-step, possibly even changing the moral.

Illustrated Books: Low-tech, Low-costs, High effect

Illustrated children's books like the Caldecott award winners present good English literature to learners at a low reading level. Teachers on the lookout for fresh approaches, both for their own professional growth and for the invigoration of their classes, will find these books eminently flexible with their marvelous pictures and captivating narratives.

Just one good book can upgrade a language program or a teacher's professional library. Once these books are in place, there are two ways to go: one is to leave them

in the resource center for teachers to use at their discretion. Another is to use them as the nuclei for team planning and staff development. In-service training can be carried out by teams that decide to plan a unit around a given book.

Consider a group of teachers reading a book together, brainstorming activities, trying them out with their classes and returning for a second session with questions and suggestions generated from those classes! The books can be the focal points for ongoing enrichment as the team develops theme-based units.

This article has emphasized the Caldecott award-winning books because their illustrations lend themselves to enhancing language learning. The Caldecott award winners, with their pictures, wit, depth, and authenticity are treasures, unsurpassed in potential for enhancing the teaching and learning of English.

Books Used in the Pilot Project

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THE CALDECOTT AWARDS: For the Illustrator, Acknowledged Excellence; For the Reader, Pure Joy

What is a Caldecott Award? It is, simply, the highest honor that can be given to a U.S. illustrator of children's books. It is the Pulitzer Prize, the Nobel Peace Prize, the Academy Award of movies, the Olympic gold in sports-the highest accolade bestowed for the best work in one's chosen field.

In the world of books, especially children's books, there is a special joy and drama added to enhance the printed word: it is the picture that tells the tale, that aids the child's imagination; an inspiration that breathes life into the words and engenders more images in the child's mind as the author's words unfold.

The Caldecott awards-named for British artist and illustrator Randolph Caldecott-consist of a series of gold, silver, or bronze medals, awarded annually in the United States since 1938 by the Children's Services Division of the American Library Association.

The award was established by Frederic G. Melcher, chairman of the board of the R. R. Bowker Publishing Company, in order to recognize exceptional art work for children, and to encourage more of such fine illustrations for future children's books.

But why name the award for a British artist and illustrator? In the opinion of Melcher and others, it was this artist who had given the most imaginative illustrations to children.

Caldecott was born in Chester, Cheshire, England in 1846, and died in St. Augustine, Florida in 1886. In his 40 short-lived years, this British illustrator became famous for his satirical, whimsically-drawn and colored children's books, as well as paintings, metal reliefs, and terra-cottas.

He began his career as a young bank clerk, and dabbled in drawings for local magazines. But his playing at art became serious when in 1871, he contributed to a London-based periodical, "London Society." The following year, he moved to London, determined to become a professional illustrator. He was highly successful, finally drawing for the much-esteemed, fashionable periodical, "Punch and Graphic."

In 1875 Caldecott illustrated Washington Irving's "Sketch Book," and in 1876, the same author's "Bracebridge Hall." These illustrations were judged by critics to be "more sophisticated" than his earlier works, and were said to possess an original, ingenious caricature all Caldecott's own. It was said to be these two books which assured Caldecott's eventual recognition as an artist.

The artist created exquisite imagery for some 16 children's books, including plates for Oliver Goldsmith's "Elegy on a Mad Dog" in 1879. His last work for children was done in 1885, when he illustrated Goldsmith's "The Great Panjandrum Himself."

Clearly, Melcher's choice of Caldecott was inspired.

This year, the Caldecott medal was awarded to "Grandfather's Journey," by Allen Say. The work traces an inspiring tale of a Japanese immigrant's voyage to a new land.

The strangely cute, assuredly naughty little guy cavorting on the poster included with this issue of the *English TeachingForum* is "The Stinky Cheese Man," from the 1993 Silver Caldecott Medal-winning children's book of the same name. Published in 1992 by Viking, a division of Penguin Press, the work was written by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith. The comical cynicism and irreverence of the title character is not lost on the youngest of children. At of the same time, any adult who reads the picture book to a child thoroughly enjoys himself.

Patience Lea McGuire has over 25 years of teaching English and Spanish in elementary and secondary schools. She has also taught ESL/EFL to children and adults in Texas, Mexico and Central America. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas in Austin.

Footnote 1

For a comprehensive list of award winning books in the area of children's literature, see Childrens Books: Awards and Prizes.The Children's Book Council, 568 Broadway, Suite 404, New York,NY 10012, USA.

Footnote 2

Two companies offer yearly posters display- ing the covers of Caldecott winning books from 1938 through the current year: (1) Follett Library Book Company, 4506 Northwest Highway, Crystal Lake, Illinois 60014; and (2) Perma-Bound Books, Vandalia Road, Jacksonville, Illinois 62650.

Footnote 3

A free list of best books for young adults can be obtained by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to The American Library Association, Young Adult Library Services, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, Illinois, 60611.